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ABSTRACT

All incidents of crying that occurred in a preschool setting were recorded along with the responses of other children and teachers. After pilot observations had been carried out for 3 hours at each of 20 preschool and day care centers, detailed observations were made at a single site, four hours per day, twice a week, from late fall to mid-spring. The 37 children under observation ranged in age from 28 to 48 months. In the main study, 290 crying episodes were recorded at the rate of 2.1 per hour. Observations were coded in terms of causes of crying, peer responses to crying, teacher responses to crying, and context. Each child was rated on sibling status, length of time at the center, number of friends, and verbal clarity and fluency. Findings indicate that crying was an infrequent phenomenon that was responded to infrequently by peers. Responding to crying behavior over two-thirds of the time, teachers were much more likely to console a crying girl than a crying boy and tended to respond more critically to a boy crier than to a girl crier. When they responded, children responded like their teachers. Two-thirds of crying episodes were peer-related; positive, prosocial responses were more likely to occur when a child was crying alone than when interacting with a peer. (RH)

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PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S RESPONSE TO PEER CRYING

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ABSTRACT

Episodes of children's crying and the response to crying were observed in natural preschool settings using an event sampling technique. Narrative descriptions of the episodes were coded as to cause of crying, teacher response, peer response, and context. The most common causes of crying were peer related, and children with several friends cried more than those with few or no friends. Peers responded to about 20% of the crying incidents. Responses to crying, in order of frequency, were approach, comment, stare, mediate, console, and chastize. Girls were twice as likely to be consoled as boys. Older preschoolers responded more frequently than younger children, and children with more friends responded more often than those with fewer friends. Children who responded more frequently were also those who themselves cried more. The frequency of negative (chastizing) responses was correlated with that of prosocial responses. An overriding factor in response to crying may be the degree of the child's social involvement with peers.

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S RESPONSE TO PEER CRYING[1]

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Crying is the human organism's earliest expression of emotion. It functions as a form of communication to others, especially caregivers, that the organism is distressed. Crying bridges distance and invades consciousness with a demand quality. It is the infant's way of "telling" the parent that he or she needs assistance. But the role of crying is not limited to communication with caregivers. Crying also occurs in response to another infant's crying (Sagi and Hoffman, 1976). The tendency to respond to another's distress thus appears very early and is expressed in one of the few means available to the infant. As the child acquires greater motor and cognitive skills, a number of responses to crying become possible, including efforts to alleviate the crier's distress.

Crying is an obvious and easily identified manifestation of distress, and hearing a cry, even when the crier is not seen, is a powerful elicitor of emotion in children (Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, and Cummings, 1983). Crying thus appears to be one environmental antecedent or elicitor of empathic or pre-empathic responses (Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, & Chapman 1983).

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Children's reactions to crying is thus a fruitful paradigm for studying, in a naturalistic setting, the emergence and development of empathy, caring, and other prosocial behaviors. The occurrence of prosocial responses to distress by young children is of considerable importance developmentally, as it signals a basic level of comprehension of another's feelings. The primary goal of this research was to examine children's responses to peer crying in a natural setting, in order to gain a greater understanding of the development of empathic and other prosocial behaviors.

In addition, there is little empirical data on the natural occurrence of crying. During the first six months of life an infant cries frequently. The very young infant cries because she is hungry, or angry, or in pain (Wolff, 1969). Older infants cry when a familiar person leaves (Ainsworth & Bell, 1969). There is a growing literature of the developmental changes in crying during infancy (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, & Goldsmith, 1983). However, there is almost no literature on parameters of crying in the toddler and preschool age child. Thus, another goal of this study was to collect descriptive data on the frequency, causes, and correlates of crying in preschool aged children.

Empirical studies suggest that by the age of two children are able to offer a variety of prosocial responses to evidence of distress in others (Radke-Yarrow & Zahn-Waxler, 1983). However, there is considerable disagreement in the literature as to how widespread or common such responses are. One reason for such disagreement is the wide variety in the type of stimulus conditions and settings that have been studied. Murphy's classic study (1937) used both naturalistic observations and contrived situations to study a wide range of empathic and prosocial behaviors. In that study, young children were observed to help, comfort, or seek adult assistance for a peer in distress, and also to attack or tease a distressed peer. Subsequent

observational and parent-report studies similarly demonstrate the occurrence of a wide variety of behavioral responses to another's unhappiness (Eisenberg-Berg & Hand, 1979; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1982).

While children obviously do respond sometimes to distress, it is much less clear how frequently they respond when given the opportunity. Cataloguing the frequency and variety of responses to distress in young children has implications for understanding the ontogenesis of empathy, as well as empathy-like and altruistic behavior.

Current research on the frequency of response to distress shows great variation depending on the circumstances. In a study in home settings based primarily on mothers' reports of altruistic behavior (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, and King, 1979), toddlers aged 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 made altruistic responses to 34% of the distress incidents in which they were a bystander. Distress incidents included both situations simulated by the mother and naturally occurring events involving either the mother or a visitor (playmate or family member of playmate). In addition, the experimenter visited the home to observe and also to enact some distress situations. Responses by the older children to incidents simulated by the mother were significantly higher (39%) than those simulated by an experimenter (9%), suggesting that the child's relationship to the person showing distress is an important factor influencing to their response.

Research with young children demonstrates that responses vary greatly depending on the type of stimulus used. Baseline data in an intervention study of altruistic behavior (Yarrow, Scott, and Waxler, 1973) showed that 3½ to 5½-year old children responded to somewhat less than 25% of the simulated distress incidents introduced into a structured testing situation. Responses to picture representations of distress in this study were much lower, about 1

in 8, or 12.5%. In a laboratory study of children's responses to a tape recorded sound of crying (Staub, 1970), wide variation was found depending on whether the child was alone or with a peer. For kindergarten children, the response rate was 19% when alone, 50% when with a peer.

Distress, manifested clearly by crying, commonly occurs in the context of preschool and day care, for example, in reaction to accidents, fights, reprimands, or disputes over toys. Such crying during play with peers is conceptually different from the more widely studied crying as a response to separation from parents (Bloom-Feshbach, 1980). Such incidents provide an excellent opportunity to observe children's responses to naturally occurring distress, as opposed to simulations or picture representations. In the present study, all incidents of crying that occurred in a free play preschool setting were recorded, along with the responses of other children and teachers in order to gain data on this behavior in preschool children and insight into the antecedents of this early form of altruistic behavior.

Method

Procedure

This research consisted of pilot observations carried out at a number of preschool and day care centers, followed by a main study in which detailed observations were made at a single site. In both cases, an event sampling technique was used. The observer viewed the entire group until a crying incident occurred, then observed the incident until it was concluded. The observer made a written record of what was occurring at the time, how the event started, behavior of the crier, reactions (or lack of reaction) of any children in the vicinity of the incident, any response by the teacher, and the outcome of the incident.

In order to sample a wide diversity of types of children's centers, including public and private, varied socioeconomic levels, differing ethnic groups, and different types of programs, 20 sites were selected from throughout a large urban area, for the pilot study. Observations were carried out for three hours at each of the 20 sites.

For the main study, a single site was chosen. Before beginning data collection, training was carried out by having two observers independently record all incidents of crying for four hours per day for eight days. Detailed comparisons were made of the written records each day, to assess agreement on occurrence of incidents of crying and on each of the other categories being observed: cause, reactions of others, and outcome. By the end of the training, the descriptive records of the observers agreed completely on incidents of crying; agreement on cause, reactions, and outcome was above 95% for each category. This procedure was repeated once during data collection, with the same,or higher levels of agreement. One of the trained observers did all the actual data collection.

Observations were made during indoor and outdoor free play, four hours per day, twice a week, from late fall to mid-spring. Observations were begun in the fall after the children were accustomed to the center, and were made each day after the children had arrived and become settled, in both cases to minimize crying associated with parental separation.

Subjects

The subjects for the main study were all the children in the younger division of a large, private, day care facility serving a lower-middle class, ethnically diverse population. There were 37 children, 20 male and 17 female, ranging in age from 28 months to 48 months, ($\underline{M}$ = 41.1; s.d. = 4.8). For many activities in the classroom, children were divided by age into two groups: 18

younger children (28-40 months; M = 37.1; s.d. = 2.8; 11 boys, 7 girls) and 19 older children (41-48 months; M = 44.9; s.d. = 2.7; boys, 11 girls). This age grouping was used in subsequent data analysis. The children's ethnic background was diverse and included: 23 White, 6 Asian, 6 Hispanic, and 2 Black.

Subject profiles

Three teachers completed rating scales for each child, indicating sibling status, length of time at the center, and number of friends (a friend being defined as a child to whom the subject showed preference, and with whom the subject played frequently and pleasurably). Verbal clarity and fluency was rated on a three-point scale. Observers also rated the children on number of friends and on verbal clarity and fluency; agreement between observers and teachers was 95%.

Coding

Since there is practically no extant literature on the descriptive aspects on the causes and responses to crying in preschool children one major goal of this study was to provide descriptive information on these issues. Consequently, we avoided preconceived categories and evolved empirically the coding categories used in our study. The records from pre-pilot and pilot observations were discussed and examined by the three investigators and two coders. On the basis of this analysis codes were developed and defined for each category: cause of crying, peer response, teacher response, and context. Two coders independently coded the pilot data; agreement was above 85% for all categories, and discrepancies were discussed in order to refine the codes for the main study. For the main study, the written narratives were coded by two independent coders for each category, using the following codes. Agreement between coders ranged from .85 to .95, with a mean of .91.

Causes of crying. (1) Child alone (accident, or no apparent cause); (2) Peer related (dispute over territory or possession, verbal or physical assault, interruption of activity, or cause unclear); (3) Adult related (verbal reprimand, threat of punishment, discipline, separation).

Peer responses to crying. (1) Stares (stands near crying child and watches without verbalizing or taking action); (2) Approaches (walks over to the crier and observes silently); (3) Comments (talks about the incident with another child, or offers information to the teacher as to why the child is crying); (4) Mediates (takes action to remove the source of pain or conflict or leads the crier to the teacher); (5) Consoles (offers physical or verbal comfort, by patting or hugging the crier, offering an object, or apologizing, in case of child causing the crying); (6) Ignores (appears unaware or ignores crying, even though in close proximity to the incident); (7) Chastizes (teases or hits the crier, or makes unkind remark).

Teacher responses to crying. (1) Does not notice crying or chooses to ignore it; (2) Makes neutral verbal comment or directive to crier or other involved child; (3) Scolds or punishes crier or other involved child; (4) Consoles crier or helps solve the problem causing the crying.

Context: Indoor play, outdoor play, transition.

Results

While the primary theoretical interest and focus of this study is on peer responses to crying, the descriptive data on the occurrence of crying and on teacher responses provides an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the crying as a stimulus and will be presented first.

OCCURRENCE OF CRYING

Pilot study

The amount of observed crying varied greatly at the 20 sites in the pilot study, ranging from .5 to 4.0 crying events per hour, with a mean of 2.2. Crying was less frequent at sites that had fewer children, had more structured programs, had more experienced teachers, and were not restricted to single-parent or welfare families. (These conditions often occurred in the same site; with the limited pilot data, it is impossible to disentangle the confounding of these factors). In addition, crying occurred considerably more in classrooms of 2- and 3-year-old children (2.7 incidents per hour) than in those of 4- and 5-year-olds (1.7 per hour).

Main study

Frequency, causes, and correlates of crying. A total of 290 crying episodes was recorded, at the rate of 2.1 per hour (compared to 2.2 per hour in the pilot observations), indicating that this site was typical with respect to amount of crying. The most common causes of crying were peer related, either conflict over possession and territory or accident/injury; these accounted for 65.5% of the crying episodes. Far less common were incidents involving the child alone, generally accident or injury (19.0%) and crying in reaction to teacher demands or reprimands (15.5%).

The context was significantly related to the amount and cause of crying, chi square (4, $n = 290$) = 13.4, $p < .01$, with a disproportionate amount of crying (20.3%) occurring at transition times. Also at transition times, the highest single cause of crying was teacher demands/reprimands (28.6% of the total during transition, versus 12.1% of the total over-all). Crying was far more likely to result from teacher demands during indoor activity (57.1%) than

during outdoor play (11.4%). However, peer related causes, especially accident/injury and verbal assault, were far more common outdoors. Crying from accidents involving a child alone were also more common outdoors.

There were large individual differences in the amount of crying. The number of crying incidents per child ranged from 0 to 31 (M = 7.8, s.d. = 7.5), but this figure is distorted by two extreme cases, two older girls with 29 and 31 incidents each. With these cases eliminated the means for each age and sex group were very close: younger boys, M = 6.1, s.d. = 5.3; younger girls, M = 5.6, s.d. = 2.7; older boys, M = 7.0, s.d. = 6.4; older girls, M = 7.6, s.d. = 6.9).

Children with two or more friends cried more (M = 10.1 crying incidents) than those with one or no friends (M = 4.4), $t(29) = 2.56$, $p < .05$. (With the two extreme cases eliminated, the mean for those with two or more friends was 7.1, and the differences in crying between the groups with many and few friends approached significance, $t(32) = 2.03$, $p = .051$). For children with two or more friends more crying was peer-related (76.3%, vs. 60% for children with fewer friends).

TEACHER RESPONSES TO CRYING

Pilot study

The teachers in the pilot study responded in 75% of the incidents. Their responses in order of frequency, were neutral comment, punitive comment, console, mediate (see Table 1).

Main Study

The teachers responded to crying in 67% of the cases. Their responses included, in order of frequency: punitive comment, neutral comment, mediate, and console (see Table 1). These teachers ignored crying somewhat more, and

consoled or helped somewhat less than teachers in the pilot study. However, these responses did not differ significantly from those in the pilot study, suggesting that these teachers are fairly typical of a wide range of teachers. Differences between teachers' responses to girls and boys approached significance, chi square (3, $\underline{n}$ = 290) = 7.66, $p < .058$; teachers made a higher proportion of punitive responses to boys (36.1%) than to girls (26.2%), and a higher proportion of consoling or helping responses to girls (17.5%) than to boys (7.7%). A teacher consoling a boy occurred only once across all events; a teacher consoling a girl occurred 15 times.

Insert Table 1 about here

PEER RESPONSES TO CRYING

Pilot study

Children responded to a peer's crying in 26% of the cases. Prosocial responses (approach, comment, mediate, console) were 19.3% of the total. Staring and chastizing responses totaled 2.1% and 4.5%, respectively. Crying was ignored by peers in 74.1% of the incidents (see Table 1).

Main study

Frequency and context of responses. Peer responses to a crying child were somewhat lower than in the pilot study; children responded to 19.3% of the crying incidents. Prosocial responses occurred in 13.4% of the events and were divided fairly equally among the four types (approach, comment, mediate, or console; see Table 1). Stare and chastise responses occurred in 3.4% and 2.4% of the events, respectively. In 80.7% of the cases, crying was ignored by peers. These results do not differ significantly from those of the pilot

study, indicating that the responses in this school are typical of a wide range of schools.

Chi square analysis was used to examine the relationship of responses to causes of crying. Responses to crying were not significantly related to whether the cause of crying was peer-related, adult-related, or child alone. However, there were suggestive trends. Consoling responses, rather infrequent, occurred almost always (7 out of 8 instances) in peer-related crying. Prosocial responses other than consoling were far more common when the cause involved a child alone (20% of the total) than when the cause was peer related (7.9%) or adult related (13.35); thus, a child crying alone was less likely to be ignored.

The sex of the crier was a factor in responses to crying. With responses grouped into three types (prosocial, chastize/stare, and ignore), differences in type of peer response made to boy and girl criers approached significance (chi square (2, $n = 290$) = 5.83, $p < .054$). Girls were more than twice as likely to be consoled than boys (3.8% vs. 1.5%), and boys were far more likely than girls to be stared at (5.4% vs. 1.9%) and to be chastised (3.8% vs. 1.3%).

Age, sex, friendship status, and response to crying. With the sample divided into low and high groups on number of friends (low = 0-1; high = 2 or more), and responses to crying (low = 0-2 responses; high = 3 or more), older children responded more to crying than younger, chi square (1, $n = 37$) = 3.78, $p < .05$, and children with two or more friends responded more than those with one or no friends, chi square (1, $n = 37$) = 4.88, $p < .05$. Among girls, high and low responding was unrelated to friendship status; that is, friendship status was approximately evenly divided among high and low responders. With boys, however, responding was strongly related to friendship status; among

the eleven low responding boys, nine had few friends; among the nine high responding boys, only three had few friends. Chi square analysis showed that friendship status did not differ significantly between boys and girls, or between younger and older children.

Analysis of the mean number of responses for each group supports these differences. The age differences in responses are significant, $t(30) = 2.62$, $p < .05$, but sex differences are not. The means number of responses are as follows: younger males, $\underline{M} = 1.0$; younger females, $\underline{M} = 1.3$ older males, $\underline{M} = 3.2$; older females, $\underline{M} = 3.1$. The difference in response rate in relation to friendship is significant, $t(30) = 2.04$, $p < .05$ (children with few friends, $\underline{M} = 1.4$; children with many friends, $\underline{M} = 2.9$). However, there is an interaction of friendship with age and sex. Friendship status does not affect response rate among younger children (the mean response rate for both those with few and those with many friends is 1.1); but among the older group, the mean response rate is twice as high for those with many friends $\underline{M} = 3.9$ as for those with few friends $\underline{M} = 1.9$, $t(17) = 1.8$, $p = .08$)). As in the analysis of responders, above, response rates do not differ between girls with many and few friends. However, for boys, the mean response rate for those with few friends is 1.0 while for those with many friends it is 3.9, $t(18) = 2.2$, $p < .055$. In summary, having more friends is strongly related to a higher response rate, mainly for older children, and especially for boys.

Correlations among the frequency of type of response to a cry, the frequency with which the respondent child cries, and the respondent's number of friends are shown in Table 2. The frequency of responses to crying, both

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Insert Table 2 about here

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prosocial and critical, is strongly related to the frequency with which the respondent cries. Of the prosocial behaviors, Approach and Mediating responses are significantly correlated with the frequency of the respondent's crying, as is the number of Chastizing responses made by the child. Moreover, the frequency of Chastizing is significantly correlated with the frequency of prosocial behaviors ($r=.48$, $p < .01$). These data suggest that an overriding factor may be the degree of the child's social understanding and social involvement with peers. The significant correlation of prosocial responses, particularly Mediation, with the child's number of friends, is consonant with this supposition. The cognitive or linguistic basis of mediation behavior is indicated by the significant r of .34 between frequency of Mediation and the child's verbal fluency as rated by the teacher.

The relationship of crying to responding was also examined by means of a chi square analysis of subjects. The children were grouped into four categories of criers: low (0-5 incidents, N=19); medium (6-11 incidents, N = 8); high (12-18 incidents, N = 8); and extreme (29 and 31 incidents, N = 2). Far more low and medium criers were low responders, and more high and extreme criers were high responders, chi square (3, n = 37) = 14.7, $p < .001$).

Individual differences in peer responses to crying

The number of responses per child ranged from 0 to 6 (M = 1.9, s.d. = 1.8) for 36 of the children, plus one extreme case with 11 responses. Twelve children were never observed to respond, eight responded four to six times each. Individual profiles of several children illustrate the general findings regarding the relationship among crying, responding, and friendship, although there are exceptions.

A typical example was John who was in the older group of children. He had no siblings and had been attending the Center for a number of months. He

played almost exclusively with two other boys who were known for their tendency to rough-and-tumble play. As a result of the three boys' boisterous style of interaction, John was frequently involved in peer disputes over toys and territory. These generally culminated with his being frustrated or becoming the target of aggression, and bursting into tears. Often, when crying incidents occurred, the three boys would try to resolve the problem themselves without involving the teacher. John's typical way of responding to both male and female peers involved in a crying incident was to try to console the crier and/or mediate the situation by questioning the offending child and requesting an apology.

In contrast, Ben was a child who played exclusively with another boy his age. Ben was very quiet and practically never cried or responded to any peer's crying distress. When his friend was absent, Ben played silently alone, seemingly avoiding peer contact by not initiating interaction or responding to social bids from peers.

DISCUSSION

Crying in children between 28 months to 48 months of age who are in child care is not, on average, a frequent phenomenon. Half of the children were observed to cry less than 6 times over the more than 130 hours of observation. Crying is an infrequent phenomenon, and when it occurs, it is responded to infrequently by the child's peers, 26% and 19% of the time in the two studies that were conducted. This low frequency may, in part, be due to the children's awareness that teachers are taking care of the situation, since the teachers respond over two-thirds of the time. However, one might infer from these same data that the children should be more responsive to crying by virtue of modeling of teacher behavior.

Evidence suggesting that modeling of teachers may well influence children's responses to crying is seen in the pattern of responses to crying in boys and girls. Teachers are much more likely to console a girl than a boy who is crying and also tend to respond more critically to a boy crier than to a girl crier. Similarly, while the response rates were low, the children were twice as likely to console a girl as a boy who is crying, and about three times as likely to chastize or stare at a boy as a girl. Factors other than teacher modeling contributing to this differential responsiveness are probably family and broader social norms regarding the appropriateness of crying in boys and in girls.

The data indicate that peer interactions are highly pertinent to the occurrence of crying, with two-thirds of crying episodes being peer related. However, with the exception of the relatively infrequent consoling responses, positive, prosocial responses were more likely to occur when a child was crying alone than when interacting with a peer. A child crying alone may elicit greater attention because of the greater likelihood that the child has been in an accident or has been subjected to other experiences that are more painful than frustration by a peer.

In addition to these external determinants of the response to crying, such as the sex of the crier and the social context in which the crying occurred, the findings reflect a number of individual differences of interest in the reactions to crying. Older children, children with more than one friend, and children who themselves are frequent criers are more likely to respond to another child's cry than young children, children who have few friends, or children who are infrequent criers. Moreover, these variables are interrelated and are probably reflections of a common degree of social involvement. The more socially interactive child is likely to have friends,

to be more developmentally advanced and, by virtue of the greater social interaction, to become involved in peer conflicts that precipitate crying. This same child will also be more responsive to social communication entailed in crying, trying to assist or admonishing the upset child.

These data are reminiscent of Lois Murphy's (1937) finding of a positive relationship between sympathy and aggression, both being linked to greater activity and social involvement in the preschool age child. Degree of social involvement may well prove to be an important factor in the development of empathy (Feshbach, 1978). The interactive child learns from his or her own crying some aspect of the likely subjective experiences of a peer who is crying and of the kind or events that may have led to the distress. The sympathy, mediation efforts, and other responses from teachers and from peers that reduce his or her discomfort may then, through modeling, be evoked in response to the perception of another child's distress. The give-and-take of peer interactions, the pain and pleasures that are inevitable concomitants of the formation of friendships, social attachments and sharing, may contribute to the development of role-taking skills, understanding of feelings and related components of empathy.

These processes which are hypothesized to mediate children's responsivity to the crying of peers in social contexts should be explored in future research on the effects and functions of children's crying. Also meriting investigation are the processes and consequences of the socialization of the crying response. Children learn to control their crying behavior and to suppress overt physical manifestations of emotions. Children also learn that it is appropriate to ignore some crying behaviors, react sympathetically to other instances of crying, and to respond critically in still other instances. How these controls and discriminations are acquired, and their psychological effects, are key questions in the study of children's emotional development.

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TABLE 1

Teacher and peer responses to children's crying
(as a percentage of total responses)

	Peer responses		Teacher responses	
	Pilot	Main	Pilot	Main
Approach	2.9	3.8		
Neutral comment	8.6	3.8	28.0	23.0
Mediate	3.7	3.1	8.6	7.6
Console	4.1	2.8	10.3	5.5
(Total prosocial)	(19.3)	(13.5)	(47.9)	(36.2)
Stare	2.1	3.4		
Chastize	4.5	2.4	27.9	30.7
Ignore	74.1	80.7	25.1	33.0
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

TABLE 2

Correlations among responses, crying events, and friends

	Number of times child cried	Number of friends
Responses:		
Total prosocial	.42**	.35*
Approach	.41*	.21
Comment	.12	.20
Mediate	.38*	.41*
Console	-.01	.10
Stare	.23	.05
Chastize	.48**	.29

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$